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**SOUTH ASIA AND US INTERESTS:  
PERIPHERAL, BUT IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE\*  
(\*1 Billion+ People Can Quickly Get Your Attention)**

**COURSE 4 ESSAY**

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE <b>1996</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-1996 to 00-00-1996</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>South Asia and US Interests: Peripheral, But Impossible to Ignore* (*1 Billion+ People Can Quickly Get Your Attention)</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>see report</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>9</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

South Asia—the land mass comprising of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—has been a crossroads of civilization and history for centuries. The cradle of two of the world's major religions, the home of one billion people, hundreds of languages and dialects (800 in India alone) and ethnic complexities that dwarf anything Europe can boast, the region remains problematic for the United States. South Asia has rarely been seen as vital to American interests, though crises in the area have brought it to the forefront of Washington's attention periodically. Nonetheless, South Asians see many Americans as viewing the region, and especially India, as “a land of ‘cobras, Maharajahs, monkeys and famines’” (Ganguly, 23), and the key US interest as “‘achieving the maximum security’ of this region with a ‘minimum of US commitment’” (Ganguly, 26). At best some would argue that South Asia's significance to Washington is as a developing region with potential for US markets. At worst they would see South Asia as a proxy for Great Power actions during the Cold War, of only peripheral import to the US now that the Cold War has ended.

US policy towards South Asia—during those times when the region has come up on the scope of policymakers' attention—has tended to vacillate between support for Pakistan and India, emphasizing all the while the importance of stability in the region. Today's interests focus on promoting stability, reducing nuclear proliferation, opening markets and increasing trade, and encouraging democratization. Still, even the most ardent Asianist admits that the level of interest in South Asia does not equal that of the Middle East, Europe, or East Asia. This paper seeks to find the right balance in assessing US interests and strategy toward South Asia, and seeks to sensitize the reader to the complexities of the region—complexities that will not permit a facile disregard of the area, nor an arrogant assumption of simple solutions to the political, diplomatic, economic, and social tensions that exist there.

## **CONTEXT**

**CULTURAL HISTORY** - India and Pakistan are the countries in South Asia that are key to any US security policy in the region. Their history is the single most important determinant of their behavior. Hinduism was born in India, and its precepts strongly affect Indian attitudes toward life and society. The Mughal conquest in the 16th century, lasting 300 years, introduced Islam into the northern part of the region, and resulted in the religious divergence on the sub-continent that was institutionalized by the partitioning of the territory into India and Pakistan in 1947. The British

colonial experience directly affects the psychological and institutional attitudes of Delhi and Islamabad to this day

**India** As the Mughal empire declined in the 18th century, the British East India Company moved in and by the middle of the 19th century the company had assumed direct control over three-fifths of India, and the remaining areas were held by more than 500 princely states subject to British control and intervention " (Hardgrave, 28 ) The impact of British rule on India's social, economic, educational, legal, and administrative structures was profound, and remains evident today. However, the years of colonial rule left India with a determination never to be dominated by a foreign power again. It was this factor more than any other that was the impetus for India's post-independence policy of non-alignment.

Additionally, India's sense of cultural superiority founded on its long history of religious, philosophical and artistic achievements is key to an understanding New Delhi's actions and policies. India has a deep-seated desire to be recognized in the region as a "great" power, and globally as a "major" player. This must be kept in mind as Washington addresses issues involving India. Territorial and ethnic conflicts will not likely be resolved by India's relinquishing sovereignty over a group or territory, because this would lead to a precedent that a great power would not tolerate. Moreover, in New Delhi's mind, with regard to global issues such as nuclear non-proliferation, India must be treated within the community of nations on an equal basis as other major players, not as a Third World country.

**Pakistan:** Although Pakistan shares a common cultural history with India, the overriding concern of Islamabad is to be seen as a country that is "not India." The differences are of greater import to Pakistan than the similarities. Pakistan is a self-proclaimed Islamic republic, India, a secular nation. Pakistan is monotheistic, India worships 3.5 million manifestations of God. Where India sought economic and political support from the former Soviet Union, Pakistan's superpower patron was the United States. Finally, within the region, Islamabad's key rival is the larger and more populous India.

**INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS** - The primary flashpoint between India and Pakistan is the region of Kashmir. When the sub-continent was partitioned in 1947, the princely states were allowed to decide whether to align themselves with Hindu India or Muslim Pakistan. Kashmir is predominantly Muslim, though its maharajah was Hindu, and he opted to align his region with India. This decision has resulted in fifty years of conflict. India and Pakistan have fought three times over Kashmir, the

ates' conflict persisting almost continually since 1989. "For both India and Pakistan, their claim to Kashmir validates their definition of nationhood. Pakistanis contend that India is suppressing a movement for national self-determination. Indians argue that Pakistan is aiding terrorism in Kashmir. They agree on only one thing: that Kashmir cannot be allowed to become independent." (*South Asia* 48.) Kashmir ties down over 500,000 Indian troops, and diverts resources and political energy from critical economic and social requirements in each country. It has ramifications for regional stability and improved multilateral relationships as well, since the other countries in the region do not want to be caught between the two sides.

**ECONOMIC STATUS** - Like other developing regions, South Asia represents enormous potential markets but faces the significant challenges of protectionist policies, inefficient subsidized industries and the need to reform banking institutions to attract foreign investment.

### **US INTERESTS**

**PRIMARY INTEREST** - South Asia is a region of marginal strategic interest to the United States. The primary US interest in the region is stability so that the area is not vulnerable to issues or conflicts that would affect other, vital US interests, such as US-Chinese, US-Russian, US-Japanese and US-Middle East relationships. While events in the region currently are not of paramount importance to China and Russia, it is not a stretch to see that they could seize on instability and/or conflict within the region to assert their historical prerogatives and try to turn events to their geostrategic benefit.

**ECONOMIC INTERESTS** - South Asia, especially India, has the potential for dramatic and sustained economic growth. Therefore, it is in the US interest that South Asia become integrated into the global economy, exploit its comparative advantage on the world economic stage, and fulfill its potential for growth. Economic reforms, such as dropping protectionist trade barriers and privatizing inefficient state industries would improve opportunities for increased US trade and investment. Additionally, increased commercial interaction is one way to enhance government-to-government relations in the area and with the US, and nations who have strong trading links are less likely to fight each other. Thus, pursuing US economic interests has the benefit of contributing to the primary interest of regional stability.

**DEMOCRATIC VALUES** - The United States *National Security Strategy* identifies promoting democratic values as a national interest. Although the region remains peripheral within the geostrategic context, the US is concerned with encouraging strong democracies in South Asia. India has been a democracy since independence, although the democratic form has not always resulted in the kind of human rights record Washington would like to see, particularly with regard to Kashmir and issues of women's and minority rights throughout the country. Pakistan's military has frequently been in charge of the government, and the US continues to encourage strengthening democratic institutions in that country. US global interests include transnational issues of reducing drug trafficking, protecting the environment, and limiting unconstrained population growth.

### **CHALLENGES TO US INTERESTS**

The primary challenge to US security policy in South Asia is the asymmetrical perception of interests by each player. What are merely peripheral issues to Washington are "life and death" matters for New Delhi and Islamabad. This means that India and Pakistan see much less room for negotiation than the US, and are likely to ignore Washington's attempts to "dictate" solutions to regional issues.

Foremost among the threats to regional stability and US interests is the on-going dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Periodically, Indian and Pakistani troops confront each other at the disputed border. Kashmiri separatists attack both sides whom they view as occupation forces. Thus far, all sides have managed to keep the issue of Kashmir from erupting into a broader conflict, but the potential for escalation remains. Kashmir presents the most significant stumbling block to Indian and Pakistani cooperation on a wide range of issues, and precludes effective regional cooperation.

The acquisition of nuclear weapons and delivery system technology by India and Pakistan threatens escalating conflicts into a nuclear confrontation. Moreover, it increases the possibility that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) technology will be further proliferated by India and Pakistan to other nations. Both countries have refused to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and other non-proliferation control regimes.

Economic protectionism and inefficient state ownership of production present a challenge to US interests in expanding the economic potential of the region and promoting US investment and commercial interests.

US interests in the area are also challenged by drug trafficking, rapid population growth, human rights violations and pollution throughout the region. Each of these adds to the instability of the region and impedes the establishment of optimally advantageous relations between the US and the South Asian countries.

### **US GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

**PROMOTE A NUCLEAR FREE SOUTH ASIA** - The number one goal of US policy in South Asia remains reducing proliferation of WMD worldwide. Removing nuclear weapons from the region will be exceedingly difficult. A nuclear free South Asia would eliminate many of the contentious issues that present the potential of destabilizing our more critical relationships with China and Russia. While both countries have shown restraint--and India, indeed, has stated that possession of nuclear weapons is more for national prestige and protection against China, not Pakistan, the presence of WMD technology is destabilizing in the region. The removal of nuclear weapons from South Asia would indicate a substantial increase in confidence between Pakistan and India that the ultimate objective of each is not the total destruction of the other.

**SECURE OPEN MARKETS AND FAIR TRADE** - This US objective promotes its interest in enhancing economic opportunities for US firms while also improving the economies of the area. The US seeks the mutually advantageous benefits of free trade, not a colonial, mercantilist relationship that India fears based on its experience with British rule.

**ENCOURAGE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF DEMOCRACIES** - Fully institutionalized democratic partners in South Asia will enhance stability and greatly improve progress on other issues such as human rights. India, despite the assassination of two Prime Ministers and the founder of the country, is the world's largest democracy and has an uninterrupted democratic tradition since independence. In Pakistan the case is different with a record of fragile democracies alternating with military rule.

**PROMOTE THE PEACEFUL RESOLUTION OF THE KASHMIR DISPUTE** - The resolution of the Kashmir issue is fundamental to establishing stability as well as preventing the conflict from interfering with higher priority US interests outside the region. The US goal is not to take sides but to encourage India, Pakistan, and the people of Kashmir to achieve a peaceful resolution.

**ENCOURAGE REGIONAL SECURITY/ECONOMIC ARCHITECTURE** - South Asia needs an effective regional forum such as ASEAN or APEC in which the nations of the region can discuss their own problems and with which nations from outside the region can deal with collectively rather than being forced to deal with all issues bilaterally. Although often bilateral negotiations are to US advantage, ASEAN has proven that sometimes it is

better to clear multilaterally in a region. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has the potential to be such a vehicle. Unfortunately due largely to concerns by the remainder of the region about Indian domination of the organization to date SAARC has not been overly effective.

### POLICY/ACTION OPTIONS

**CONSTRAINTS** - Since South Asia is not a vital area of interest to the US, we will not be able to devote large amounts of resources towards our policy goals. Low cost options, however, do not necessarily mean ineffective options. We believe the following provide a low cost but aggressive strategy.

**"MANAGE THE REGION/PROMOTE STABILITY"** - South Asia is no longer a chessboard for "great power maneuvering" as it was during the Cold War. Consequently, it is to the US advantage to actively engage China and Russia, two historic stakeholders with continuing influence in the area, in dialogue and consultation to ensure stability in the area. Other players, particularly Japan with its growing economic interest, can also contribute to management of regional issues.

The US should continue to exert diplomatic pressure to induce both India and Pakistan to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. We should avoid using punitive measures (i.e. the Pressler amendment) since such measures have proven counter-productive. We may find it useful to declare that the US supports a South Asia nuclear free zone, and will not transport and deploy nuclear weapons within the area.

US tools to promote a resolution of the Kashmir situation are limited. We should press for continued diplomatic encouragement by the UN, China, Russia and SAARC to promote direct negotiations between India and Pakistan. US intelligence could be provided to both sides as a confidence building measure. We should also be prepared to offer limited US logistics support to international peacekeeping forces. In large part, the issue will not be resolved without improved Pakistani-Indian relations that will only be achieved as trust and understanding between the two countries develops. "People to people" contacts--travel, student exchanges, and development of interpersonal relations among the countries' leaders should be encouraged. Additionally, military to military exchanges should be expanded, including Indian-Pakistani exchanges to improve their dialogue and understanding.

**PROMOTE OPEN MARKETS AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES** - The Department of Commerce should energetically promote US products. We should avoid imposing tariff regimes in response to tariffs from the region since this policy proved ineffective in East Asia. We should use the Export-Import Bank and other mechanisms to provide capital for businesses within the region to purchase American products.



**TRANSNATIONAL INTERESTS INCLUDING NARCOTICS, HUMAN RIGHTS, POPULATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT -**

The United States should encourage SAARC to take an aggressive posture on these issues since individual countries are unlikely to have the political will to take effective action. Particularly in the case of Pakistan we should provide direct assistance to counter the drug trade and this assistance should only be conditioned on the effectiveness of this aid in reducing drug flows.

**CONCLUSION**

US attention to international security has historically been measured by the dollars focused on an issue or region. The current reality of decreasing budgets for foreign assistance and operation of the State Department requires a new paradigm. Although the United States does not now, and probably will not in the future, have vital security interests in South Asia, we cannot afford to ignore the region altogether. It is a growing market of 1 billion people, with a large and well-educated elite and middle class. Ignoring the region may not imperil US interests; however, failing to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the end of the Cold War and this growing market is short-sighted. Careful monitoring, diplomatic and economic engagement, and minimal investment will pay off for Washington by removing the potential for spillover into more critical areas.

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